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ABSTRACT

Nineteen ninety-two is the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. This position statement challenges educators to participate in commemorating the quincentenary by seriously examining the available scholarship to enhance knowledge about 1492, and in turn, to enhance the knowledge of students. Specifically, educators are called upon to help students comprehend the contemporary relevance of 1492 and provide them with basic, accurate knowledge about Columbus's voyages, their historical setting, and unfolding events. This paper highlights a number of important facets of the history of Columbus's voyages that should be stressed, including: Columbus did not discover a new world and thus, initiate American history; the real America Columbus encountered in 1492 was a different place from the precontact America often portrayed in folklore, textbooks, and the mass media; and as a result of forces emanating from 1492, Native Americans suffered catastrohpic mortality rates. A 26-item list of references is included. (DB)

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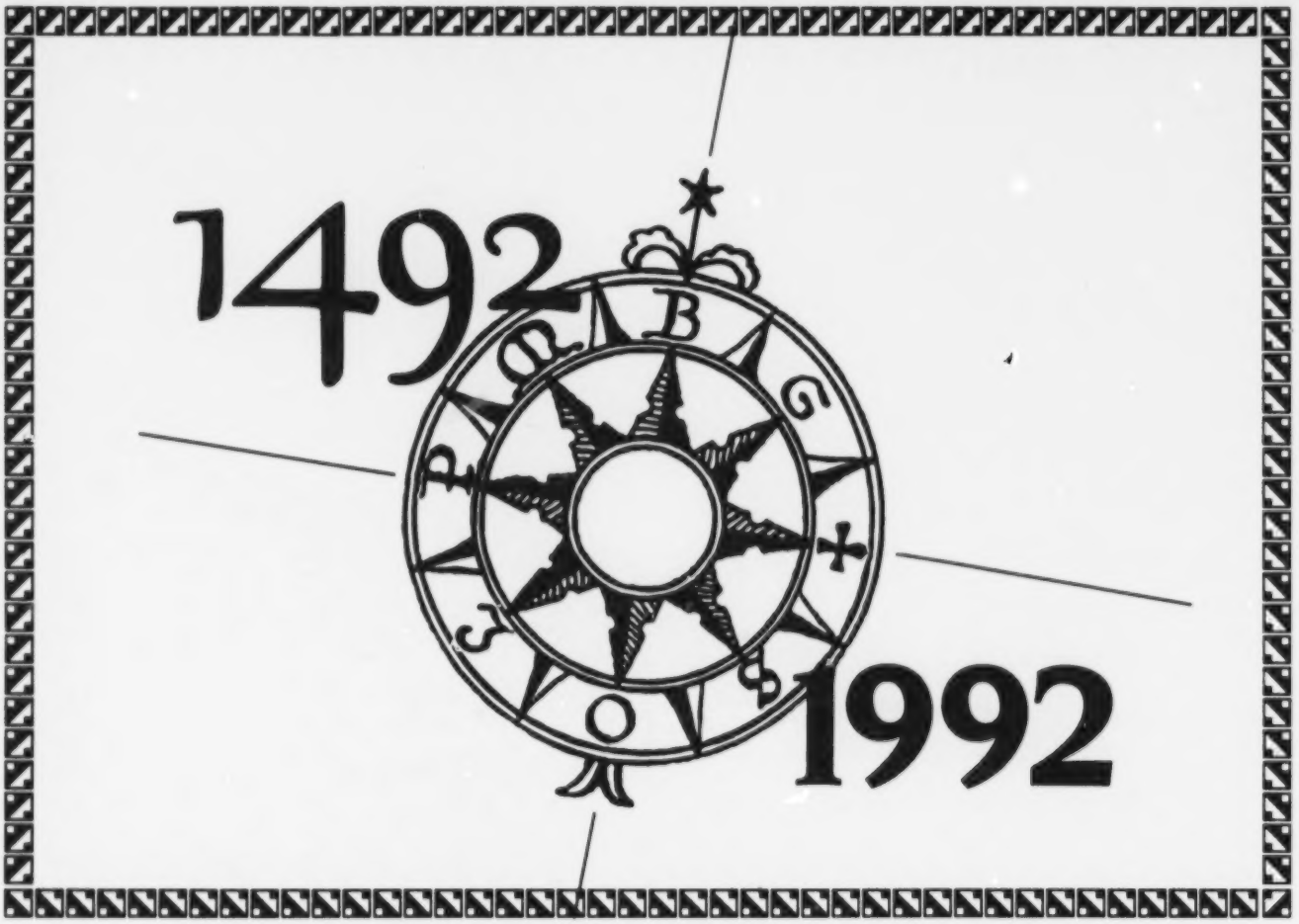

The Columbian Quincentenary

An Educational Opportunity

Nineteen ninety-two is the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. The voyage of Columbus is a much too significant event in human history for the nation's schools and colleges to ignore or to treat romantically or trivially. The most fitting and enduring way in which educators can participate in commemorating the quincentenary is to examine seriously the available scholarship to enhance our knowledge about 1492 and, in turn, to enhance the knowledge of our students. Specifically, educators should

- help students comprehend the contemporary relevance of 1492, and
- provide students with basic, accurate knowledge about Columbus's voyages, their historical setting, and unfolding effects.

Sixty years after Columbus's first landfall in the Americas, Francisco Lopez de Gomara wrote: "The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies." In the year the thirteen English colonies declared their independence from Britain, Adam Smith observed: "The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."

Although these two famous assessments of the significance of 1492 in human history may be overstatements, it is certainly true that the world as we know it would not have come to be were it not for the chain of events set in motion by European contact with the Americas.

The Contemporary Relevance of 1492

One of the most significant and visible features of the contemporary United States is its multiethnic and culturally pluralistic character. Scholars describe the United States as one of history's first universal or world nations—its people are a microcosm of humanity with biological, cultural, and social ties to all other parts of the earth. The origin of these critical features of our demographic and our civic life lies in the initial encounters and migrations of peoples and cultures of the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

Another significant feature of the United States is the fact that the nation and its citizens are an integral part of a global society created by forces that began to unfold in 1492. Geographically, the Eastern and Western Hemispheres were joined after millen-

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nia of virtual isolation from one another. Economically, the growth of the modern global economy was substantially stimulated by the bullion trade linking Latin America, Europe, and Asia; the slave trade connecting Africa, Europe, and the Americas; and the fur trade joining North America, western Europe, and Russia. Politically, the contemporary worldwide international system was born in the extension of intra-European conflict into the Western Hemisphere, the establishment of European colonies in the Americas, and the accompanying intrusion of Europeans into the political affairs of Native Americans, and the Native Americans' influence on the political and military affairs of European states. Ecologically, the massive transcontinental exchange of plants, animals, microorganisms, and natural resources initiated by the Spanish and Portuguese voyages modified the global ecological system forever.

Basic Knowledge about the Historical Setting and Effects of Columbus's Voyages

Educators should ensure that good contemporary scholarship and reliable traditional sources be used in teaching students about Columbus's voyages, their historical settings, and unfolding effects. Scholarship highlights some important facets of history that are in danger of being disregarded, obscured, or ignored in the public hyperbole that is likely to surround the quincentenary. Particular attention should be given to the following.

1. Columbus did not discover a new world and, thus, initiate American history.

Neither did the Vikings nor did the seafaring Africans, Chinese, Pacific Islanders, or other people who may have preceded the Vikings. The land that Columbus encountered was not a new world. Rather, it was a world of peoples with rich and complex histories dating back at least fifteen thousand years or possibly earlier. On that fateful morning of October 12, 1492, Columbus did not discover a new world. He put, rather, as many historians have accurately observed, two old worlds into permanent contact.

2. The real America Columbus encountered in 1492 was a different place from the precontact America often portrayed in folklore, textbooks, and the mass media.

The America of 1492 was not a wilderness inhabited by primitive peoples whose history was fundamentally different from that of the peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere. Many of the same phenomena characterized, rather, the history of the peoples of both the Western and the Eastern Hemispheres, including: highly developed agricultural systems, centers of dense populations, complex civilizations, large-scale empires, extensive networks of long-distance trade and cultural diffusion, complex patterns of interstate conflict and cooperation, sophisticated systems of religious and scientific belief, extensive linguistic diversity, and regional variations in levels of societal complexity.

3. Africa was very much a part of the social, economic, and political system of the Eastern Hemisphere in 1492.

The Atlantic slave trade, which initially linked western Africa to Mediterranean Europe and the Atlantic islands, soon extended to the Americas. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the number of Africans who crossed the Atlantic to the Americas exceeded the number of Europeans. The labor, experiences, and cultures of the African-American people, throughout enslavement as well as after emancipation, have been significant in shaping the economic, political, and social history of the United States.

4. The encounters of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans following 1492 are not stories of vigorous white actors confronting passive red and black spectators and victims.

Moreover, these were not internally homogeneous groups but represented a diversity of peoples with varied cultural traditions, economic structures, and political systems. All parties pursued their interests as they perceived them—sometimes independently of the interests of others, sometimes in collaboration with others, and sometimes in conflict with others. All borrowed from and influenced the others and, in turn, were influenced by them. The internal diversity of the Native Americans, the Africans, and the Europeans contributed to the development of modern American pluralistic culture and contemporary world civilization.

5. As a result of forces emanating from 1492, Native Americans suffered catastrophic mortality rates.

By far the greatest contributors to this devastation were diseases brought by the explorers and those who came after. The microorganisms associated with diseases such as smallpox, measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, and influenza had not evolved in the Americas; hence, the indigenous peoples had no immunity to these diseases when the Europeans and Africans arrived. These diseases were crucial allies in the European conquest of the Native American. The ensuing wars between rival European nations that were played out in this hemisphere, the four centuries of Indian and European conflicts, as well as the now well-documented instances of genocidal and displacement policies of the colonial and postcolonial governments further contributed to the most extensive depopulation of a group of peoples in the history of humankind. Despite this traumatic history of destruction and deprivation, Native American peoples have endured and are experiencing a cultural resurgence as we observe the 500th anniversary of the encounter.

6. Columbus's voyages were not just a European phenomenon but, rather, were a facet of Europe's millennia-long history of interaction with Asia and Africa.

The "discovery" of America was an unintended outcome of Iberian Europe's search for an all-sea route to the "Indies"—a search stimulated in large part by the disruption of European-Asian trade routes occasioned by the collapse of the Mongol Empire. Technology critical to Columbus's voyages such as the compass, the sternpost rudder, gunpowder, and paper originated in China. The lateen sail, along with much of the geographical knowledge on which Columbus relied, originated with or was transmitted by the Arabs.

7. Although most examinations of the United States historical connections to the Eastern Hemisphere tend to focus on northwestern Europe, Spain and Portugal also had extensive effects on the Americas.

From the Columbian voyages through exploration, conquest, religious conversion, settlement, and the development of Latin American mestizo cultures, Spain and Portugal had a continuing influence on life in the American continents.

The Enduring Legacy of 1492

Certain events in human history change forever our conception of who we are and how we see the world. Such events not only change our maps of the world, they alter our mental landscapes as well. The event of five hundred years ago, when a small group of Europeans and, soon after, Africans, encountered Native Americans is of this magnitude. Educators contribute to the commemoration of the quincentenary in intellectually significant and educationally appropriate ways when they assist students in becoming knowledgeable about this event and about its critical role in shaping contemporary America as a universal nation within an interdependent world.

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Signatories to the National Council for the Social Studies Columbian Quincentenary Position Statement

American Anthropological Association

American Association of School Administrators

American Association of School Librarians

American Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages

American Historical Association

American Indian Heritage Foundation

Association for Childhood Education International

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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